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Conflict and food security - Security Council, 9036th meeting

11-13 minutes

Russian Federation Delegate Refutes United States Claim That His Country Is Holding World Hostage with Blockade of Ukraine's Ports

A global food crisis, already impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic and climate change, is being driven to famine levels worldwide by the war in Ukraine and the resulting lack of grain exports, more than 75 speakers told the Security Council today in a ministerial-level open debate on conflict and food security.

“When war is waged, people go hungry”, said António Guterres, Secretary-General of the United Nations, noting that 60 per cent of the world’s undernourished people live in areas affected by conflict. In 2021, most of the 140 million people suffering acute hunger lived in just 10 countries: Afghanistan, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ethiopia, Haiti, Nigeria, Pakistan, South Sudan, Sudan, Syria and Yemen. “When this Council debates conflict, you debate hunger,” he stressed. “And when you fail to reach consensus, hungry people pay a high price.”

He noted that, in April, the World Food Programme (WFP) and its partners distributed food and cash to more than 3 million

Ukrainians, also announcing that the Central Emergency Response Fund will release \$30 million to meet urgent food security and nutrition needs in Niger, Mali, Chad and Burkina Faso — “a drop in the ocean”, he pointed out. Around the world, 44 million people in 38 countries are at emergency levels of hunger, he warned, noting the Russian Federation’s invasion of its neighbour has effectively ended Ukraine’s food exports, with price increases of up to 30 per cent for staple foods threatening people in countries across Africa and the Middle East.

“Most important of all, we need to end the war in Ukraine,” he stressed, noting Security Council resolution 2417 (2018) specifies that goods and supplies are essential to civilians’ survival. “There is enough food for everyone in the world,” he said, but the issue is about distribution. “In our world of plenty, I will never accept the death from hunger of a single child, woman or man,” he stressed. “Neither should the members of this Council.

David Beasley, Executive Director of the World Food Programme stated: “When a nation that is the breadbasket of the world becomes a nation with the longest bread line of the world, we know we have a problem.” Even before the Ukraine crisis struck, the world was already facing an unprecedented, perfect storm because of conflict, climate change and the COVID-19 pandemic. Over the course of several years, the number of people marching to starvation has ballooned from 80 million to 323 million, with 49 million at risk of famine in 43 countries, he said.

When a country like Ukraine, which provides food for 400 million people, is out of the market, it creates market volatility, he continued. The United Nations is trying to reach people inside Ukraine, but that does not solve the problem outside that country,

he pointed out, stressing the need to get ports running — with 36 countries importing more than 50 per cent of their grain from that region. Failure to open the ports in the Odessa region is a declaration of war on global food security, he warned, and will result in famines, destabilization and mass migration around the world.

Qu Dongyu, Director-General of the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), highlighted that, worldwide, prosperity is being reversed. Agriculture is one of the keys to lasting peace and security, but the last five years have witnessed yet another spike in global levels of acute hunger. Between 2018 and 2021, the number of people in crisis situations who live in countries where conflict was the main driver of acute food insecurity increased by a staggering 88 per cent, to over 139 million.

With Ukraine and the Russian Federation together exporting 30 per cent of the cereals and 67 per cent of sunflower oil in the world, he underscored that “what happens to one affects us all”.

He appealed to Member States to continue providing the necessary aid for food insecurity globally and continue to support the contributions of international organizations like FAO, the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) and WFP, among others.

Sara Menker, Founder and Chief Executive Officer of Gro Intelligence, also briefing the Council, observed that the Russian Federation-Ukraine conflict did not start a food security crisis; it simply added fuel to a fire that was long in the works. Price increases in major food crops have made an additional 400 million people food insecure — a nearly 40 per cent increase globally in the last five months and equivalent to the number of people that

China has taken out of poverty in the last 20 years.

The lack of fertilizer and record-low inventories in cooking oils and grains have already started to unravel decades of global economic progress, she said. While the Russian Federation and Ukraine used to provide nearly a third of the world's wheat exports and are top-five global exporters of corn, she noted all Ukrainian ports remain closed. The international community must coordinate a global response and eschew a “to each their own mentality”, she emphasized.

In the ensuing debate that stretched into the evening, high-ranking ministers and delegates also sounded that alarm regarding the war in Ukraine and its impact on the worsening global food situation.

In particular, speakers warned that countries in Africa, Asia and the Middle East face an increasingly grave situation, highlighting the risk of famine posed by blockaded Ukrainian grain exports that customarily feed millions worldwide.

Shirley Ayorkor Botchwey, Minister for Foreign Affairs of Ghana, noted that, perhaps for the first time since the Second World War, the impact on food security resulting from one conflict is being seen in every country. Welcoming the acknowledgement in Security Council resolution 2417 (2018) of the link between conflict and hunger, she nonetheless stressed that there is still much to be done to integrate peacebuilding objectives into the creation of resilient food systems. While the current global food security crisis predates the Russian Federation's invasion of Ukraine, the war has clearly exposed the interconnected nature and fragility of global food systems.

Echoing those concerns, Michael Moussa Adamo, Minister for

Foreign Affairs of Gabon, said conflict not only destroys civilian infrastructure, but it also uses hunger as a weapon of war.

Agricultural facilities are deliberately targeted and the displaced persons lack access to food. Respect for international humanitarian law and Council resolutions is essential, he stressed, recalling Member States' obligation to allow unimpeded humanitarian access without politicization. Welcoming the establishment by Secretary-General of the Global Crisis Response Group on Food, Energy and Finance, he urged the Council to deepen its thinking on accountability for "crimes of famine", as they are dehumanizing.

Highlighting the situation in South Asia, Shri V. Muraleedharan, Minister of State for External Affairs of India, said the global South has been adversely impacted both by the conflict in Ukraine and the measures put in place in response. He warned against hoarding and speculation in food grain stocks and noted India's announcement of new measures on wheat exports. In addition, he cautioned against linking humanitarian and development aid with political progress, which will only exacerbate food insecurity in conflict situations.

Bilawal Bhutto Zardari, Minister for Foreign Affairs of Pakistan, noted that 80 per cent of the world's 800 million undernourished people and the 40 million facing famine inhabit countries driven by or emerging from conflict. Even those not directly involved in a conflict pay the price of war; the conflict in Ukraine puts Pakistanis at risk of going hungry, as his country relies heavily on wheat and fertilizer from that region.

Antony J. Blinken, Secretary of State of the United States, recalling WFP and FAO estimates that people affected by food

insecurity due to conflict would increase to an estimated 161 million in 2022, noted that the Russian Federation's war in Ukraine could add another 40 million people to that total. That country's flagrant disregard of resolution 2417 (2018) is just the latest example of a Government using the hunger of civilians to advance its objectives. The food supply for millions of Ukrainians and millions more around world "has quite literally been held hostage by the Russian military", he said, noting 20 million tons of grain sit unused in Ukrainian silos as food prices skyrocket.

However, the representative of the Russian Federation refuted accusations suggesting his country wants to starve everyone to death, adding that threats of a global food crisis did not arise in 2022. Various factors — including speculation on Western food futures markets and unilateral illegal economic sanctions — are not the fault of the Russian Federation. In the context of the active "proxy war" with the Russian Federation in Ukraine, Western delegations have essentially taken the entire developing world hostage, leading it towards hunger. Only they can change this situation, he said, also disputing the claim that the Russian Federation is blocking agricultural exports from Ukraine.

The representative of Ukraine responded that the full-fledged war by the Russian Federation against his country threatens some 400 million people worldwide who depend on Ukrainian grain exports, which have almost stopped due to blockages of Ukrainian seaports. The Russian Federation is also seizing Ukrainian grain for its own consumption or to illegally sell it on international markets. He warned that any country that knowingly purchases the stolen grain will be considered complicit in the crime. This is a war of choice by President Vladimir V. Putin, he stressed.

Therefore, it will also be his choice if millions of people face starvation. As soon as Moscow is compelled to end the war, the looming threat of hunger will be over.

Also speaking were ministers and representatives of Kenya, Albania, Mexico, Norway, United Arab Emirates, Ireland, United Kingdom, France, Brazil, China, Romania, Canada, Hungary, Luxembourg, Lithuania (also speaking for Estonia and Latvia), Japan, Guatemala, Sweden (also speaking for Denmark, Finland, Iceland and Norway), Croatia, Panama, Bangladesh, Switzerland, Jordan, Uruguay, Thailand, Turkey, Egypt, Morocco, Iran, Liechtenstein, Slovenia, Algeria, Malta, Ecuador, Fiji (also on behalf of the Pacific Islands Forum), Cyprus, Italy, Venezuela, Bulgaria, Qatar, Spain, Dominican Republic (also on behalf of the Group of Friends of Action on Conflict and Hunger), Ethiopia, Belarus, Viet Nam, Belgium, Republic of Korea, South Africa, New Zealand, Myanmar, Chile, Netherlands, Nepal, Peru, Portugal, Poland, Australia, Maldives, Niger, Indonesia, Germany, Mauritius, Namibia and Greece.

The head of the European Union delegation also spoke, as did the representative of the Holy See, in their capacity as observer.

The representatives of India and Pakistan took the floor for a second time.

The meeting began at 11:04 a.m. and ended at 8:03 p.m.